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SUBJECT: TURKEY: BALLOT BOX "VICTORY" DEPENDS ON THE VIEW

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11. (C) Summary: As the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) inches closer to winning more than 40 percent of the national vote in March 29 local elections, all parties are positioning themselves to claim "victory." Prime Minister Erdogan, sensing the detrimental electoral effects of an ailing economy, has toned down his prior boastful predictions that AKP would win 50 percent of the vote and would capture the opposition "castles" of Diyarbakir and Izmir. He now says the baseline to measure victory is 42 percent -- AKP's take in 2004 local elections. Opposition parties are declaring that anything short of 50 percent of the vote would be an electoral defeat for AKP, and signal the first step of its inevitable decline. Objective observers call the opposition's definition of AKP success out of touch, and agree that 40 percent is the critical "psychological threshold" for voters to perceive an AKP win. By this more realistic measure, AKP is poised for a minor victory. End summary.

AKP Lowers the Bar for Success

12. (U) Speaking on a March 20 live ATV interview, PM Erdogan said that the criteria by which to measure AKP's success or failure should be 2004 local elections -- when AKP won 42 percent of the nation-wide vote. The 2007 general election result of 47 percent would be an inappropriate comparison because of the different nature of the local and national elections, according to Erdogan. Erdogan's statement has been interpreted as backtracking from his many prior confident predictions about AKP besting its 47 percent showing in 2007 elections.

13. (SBU) "Radikal" columnist Murat Yetkin pointed out in a recent column that throughout late 2008 and early 2009 Erdogan had announced that AKP's goal was to increase its support to more than 47 percent. Erdogan also announced that AKP sought to increase its 2004 result of winning mayorships in 58 of Turkey's 81 provincial capitals, to control of all 181. He had also made confident public predictions that AKP would win in Diyarbakir and prove that the city was not the "fortress" of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), and would defeat the Republican People's Party (CHP) in its self-perceived "castle" of Izmir. As late as February 2008, senior AKP contacts told us confidently that they would win 47 percent or more, and would win Diyarbakir and Izmir.

14. (SBU) Many of our AKP contacts are now more realistic about AKP potential results. Few are predicting a flat-out win in Izmir. Instead, they claim there is still a chance to win the city and are focusing more on the provincial assembly, where AKP could win the plurality of seats. They are more upbeat about Diyarbakir, but are entertaining the possibility of defeat there as well.

Opposition Angling to Frame Results as AKP Loss

15. (SBU) Opposition parties, meanwhile, are setting a high bar for AKP success by pointing to Erdogan's earlier overconfident predictions about AKP increasing its already remarkable national support in 2007 elections. CHP Chairman Deniz Baykal has declared at numerous public events that "less than 50 percent will show that AKP has failed." CHP members we have spoken to insist that any decline in AKP votes from the 2007 results will be a symptom of the nation turning away from AKP policies. Ideologically, this would represent "victory" to a secularist, statist party opposed to the emphasis AKP has placed on religion and ethnicity, even if CHP does not significantly expand its take of the electoral pie.

16. (SBU) In a February press conference, MHP Chairman Bahceli said that his goal was to show that AKP is not the only alternative for Turkey. MHP members we have spoken to have followed CHP's lead in defining MHP's success in terms of AKP

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failing to achieve ever-rising percentages of the popular vote. The marginal Saadet Party (SP) will claim any increase over its 2007 vote-share of 2.3 percent to be a victory over AKP, arguing that such votes could only have come from voters who otherwise would have voted for AKP.

17. (C) Sinan Onal, a senior advisor to DTP Chairman Ahmet Turk, told us that DTP's expected gains in the Southeast would disprove PM Erdogan's repeated claims that AKP would demonstrate supremacy in the region. Onal said DTP hopes to increase its 4.9 percent take in 2004 local elections to 7 percent. He said that holding Diyarbakir and winning back any of the cities where AKP had defeated DTP in 2004, such as Van, Bingol, or Agri, would signal defeat for AKP in an area that it had heavily targeted with money and with the attention (and several visits) of Erdogan.

18. (C) Orhan Kaya, an long-time AKP political consultant who is currently an AKP candidate for the provincial general assembly from the Ankara sub-province of Sincan, told us that the opposition's method for judging AKP victory or loss are self-serving and "wildly unrealistic." Kaya said that perhaps Turkey's floundering opposition parties would have more success if they "set a bar for themselves" instead of focusing on AKP. AKP MP Nihat Ergun responded coyly to Baykal's statement that "anything less than 52 percent" would be a defeat for AKP by saying, "If getting 45 percent of the vote in four successive elections is a defeat, we as a party are willing to be defeated. Along the same lines, if getting 20 percent in five successive elections is a success, I wish Baykal all the success."

Forty Percent a Psychological Barrier

19. (C) Most of our contacts believe it is unrealistic to use 2007 national elections as a baseline. They see 40 percent as the critical threshold in Turkey's fractured political scene. AKP Vice Chair Reha Denemec told us that he expects AKP to win more than 45 percent of the vote but that less than 40 percent would be perceived as a loss both inside and outside the party. A and G Polling Company President Adil

Gur told us that AKP "cannot be regarded as the loser unless it gets less than 40 percent." Gur said that even though AKP will not win the "castles" of Diyarbakir, Izmir, and the heavily secularist Ankara municipality of Cankaya, winning the "critical" 40 percent of votes nationally will demonstrate that AKP has preserved its place as the preeminent party. Metropoll President Ozer Sencar told us that if AKP went below 40 percent, "it would mean that the public is starting to hold AKP responsible for their problems."

¶10. (C) Winning key mayorships will also be an important indicator of success. Sencar told us that AKP losing certain key cities, such as Istanbul or Ankara, would have significance beyond just votes. Kaya told us that the results in the key races of Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Diyarbakir, Trabzon, Antalya, and Van will be just as important as percentages. According to Kaya, holding Ankara and Istanbul will be "necessary for AKP to claim victory," a CHP loss in Izmir would "lead to a collapse of the party," and "losing Van would be a major blow to AKP's effort in the Southeast." TESAV political think tank President Erol Tuncer told us that he expects AKP to again win 70 percent of the municipal mayorships across the country. He believes that such a result would be impossible to realistically characterize as a loss.

Comment

¶11. (C) The public's perception is ultimately the key arbiter of victory. Although we doubt the majority of voters will hold Erdogan to his ambitious goals early in the campaign, we are nonetheless hearing that some who previously voted for AKP are now preparing to do so only because it is the "least bad of all the bad options." Under such circumstances, a status quo result -- no major changes in control of key cities and an AKP win with 40 to 45 percent of the vote -- is

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most likely sufficient to translate into a minor AKP victory.

The loss of Ankara or Istanbul -- an unlikely scenario according to current polls -- would not fit into a victory scenario, however, no matter how well AKP fares on the national level. Such a loss would be a palpable symbol to which the opposition would easily, and eagerly, cling as evidence that AKP is losing the trust of Turkish society.

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Jeffrey